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Mariana Islands – US Military Strategy ‘On Hold’

BY GRANT NEWSHAM

A recent Bloomberg article about the Chinese-owned Imperial Pacific casino on Saipan in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI) makes a compelling tale of large scale money laundering and corruption in local government. However, half of the story is missing. That is: Chinese resort developers serving, wittingly or not, as part of a PRC economic/political warfare scheme and stymying US military efforts to further develop training areas in the CNMI.

In particular, the US Navy and Marine Corps’ longstanding plan to develop the uninhabited Pagan Island, 200 miles north of Saipan, as an amphibious training area – the only such US-controlled training site west of Hawaii – is on hold once again.

CNMI and Guam, both American territories, are strategically important given their locations in the Western Pacific close to Asia. The well-developed US naval and air facilities on Guam are especially important. While neither location has received the attention it deserves from Washington – the US Navy and Air Force have maintained and are gradually expanding a presence on Guam. Important multilateral naval and air exercises are routinely held in and around Guam and CNMI. Meanwhile, preparations and infrastructure construction are underway to eventually move about 8,000 Marines from Okinawa to Guam. But to train Marines (and sailors) for amphibious operations – combining ground, sea, and air capabilities – requires space, both ocean and land. Guam has plenty of the former but not enough of the latter available.

Marines have been periodically conducting limited training on Tinian (near Saipan and part of CNMI) for many years, but landing beaches are small and there is not enough room for maneuver once ashore, much less to employ a full range of weapons. This is roughly akin to a baseball team practicing on a basketball court.

This is where Pagan Island comes into play; Pagan is big enough and isolated enough to train amphibious forces at a necessary scale – and to use nearly all of the necessary weapons as well as to conduct useful maneuvers ashore. An amphibious training area on Pagan would also allow US forces to train with partner nations’ amphibious forces such as Japan, Australia, South Korea, and others. This builds both operational skills and linkages, and also has favorable political knock-on effects as militaries become more capable and more interoperable, while also demonstrating that Asia’s free nations will defend themselves. The Pagan plan has been in the works for years, but has proceeded fitfully – partly owing to legal challenges claiming environmental, cultural, and archaeological harm, but also due to the US military and government giving the matter inadequate priority. The ongoing lawsuits against the Pagan plan may appear vexatious, but they are also a part of the American system. The US Government has plenty of competent legal support and simply needs to make its case – as it did with plans for military construction on Guam in recent years.

However, the appearance in the mid-2000s of Chinese casino/resort developers promising billions of dollars in investments and thousands of jobs in Saipan (the capital of CNMI) threw a wrench into the

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APB Series Editor: Dr. Satu Limaye
APB Series Coordinator: Peter Valente
Special Series Curator: Cleo Paskal

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works. The CNMI have a small population — around 60,000 — and few economic prospects after the garment industry closed down in the early 2000s. Outsiders often mistakenly think Guam and CNMI are the same. They are not. They are separate political entities and have different societies, though they share culture and history. Guam also has a larger population, is comparatively robust economically and has a longstanding tolerance — indeed participation and support — for the American military presence.

Although CNMI society has a ‘pro-US military’ segment that is also suspicious of unchecked Chinese development, the Chinese resort developers’ offers were attractive for many people, particularly those in the CNMI government looking for revenue. But part of the deal, both implicit and sometimes explicit, is the idea — sowed by the Chinese developers and off-island environmentalists — that the US military using CNMI is a bad thing — as tourists will not want to come somewhere where the military is making noise, polluting, and otherwise upsetting tourists. This is akin in scale and character to a US resort company going to China’s Hainan Island and announcing it will invest a few tens of billions dollars in resorts, creating thousands of jobs and prosperity, but with one caveat: the People’s Liberation Army will have to leave the island. After all, tourists won’t want to come somewhere where the military is operating. It is unlikely that Chinese authorities would put up with this. Yet the US government under both current and prior administrations has shown curious indifference to Chinese subversion on American territory.

It should be noted that companies like Imperial Pacific are not ‘private’ companies in a Western sense. They are best viewed as part of the PRC’s larger strategic ‘influence’ efforts, and will always do the government’s bidding when directed.

While the specifics vary, Chinese behavior in CNMI is part of a pattern seen elsewhere in the Pacific, such as Micronesia, Tonga, Vanuatu, Fiji. It starts with Chinese financial aid and investment along with commercial inroads, then Chinese immigrants, leading to influence over local governments, and there is invariably a military angle somewhere down the road. This angle can range from Chinese military access to ports and airfields to ‘blocking efforts’ as seen throughout Micronesia. The same basic pattern plays out in other parts of the world — particularly Africa — with Ethiopia, Angola, and Djibouti being prime examples.

As for CNMI, the United States will do well to use all intelligence and investigative resources at its disposal to protect itself from Chinese subversion. It is not enough to tell the PRC developers to ‘get lost.’

Finally, the U.S. must pay attention to CNMI, Guam, and other Pacific Island nations, and give them an alternative to Imperial Pacific sorts of blandishments. Even under constrained resources, the U.S. must be able to afford a more robust Pacific engagement. One interesting proposal being quietly pushed by the Japanese is a ‘public-private’ US-Japan partnership to substantially improve infrastructure in CNMI and Guam — and elsewhere in the Pacific islands. But it has always been devilishly hard to get anyone who matters in Washington interested in this region. This must change. China’s success at establishing de facto control of the South China Sea and exerting influence within the so-called 1st Island Chain, is just a foretaste of what is coming to the 2nd Island Chain, which CNMI and Guam anchor.

The US will hopefully wake up, and it will be good if more US officials can look at a map and locate CNMI and Guam without scratching their heads.

Grant Newsham is a Senior Research Fellow at the Japan Forum for Strategic Studies and is a retired US Marine officer. He can be contacted at GNewsham78@gmail.com.